



Galveston County joins program to scan kids' eyes

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GALVESTON-- Galveston County became the first in Texas to purchase eye-scanning equipment as part of a national program to keep track of children by recording unique characteristics of their irises, officials said.

Sheriff Gean Leonard introduced the program Thursday along with representatives of Massachusetts-based Biometric Intelligence & Identification.

The company, which sold the county two biometric scanners for \$35,000, is working to build a national database dubbed the Children's Identification and Location Database, or CHILD Project.

"The technology is fairly complex, but the concept is incredibly simple," Leonard said. "This spider web of information is going to provide for us an opportunity to very quickly, very simply, very easily—through technology—be able to identify those who may be missing for a variety of reasons."

Biometric President Sean Mullin said a person's iris is unique, like a fingerprint. The system can scan an eye and match an iris in 3 to 5 seconds after comparing it with stored images in the database, he said.

The technology was originally developed to keep track of prisoners, company officials said. Galveston County might also use it to help identify elderly people suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

Galveston County is the first sheriff's department in Texas and the 47th nationwide to join the project, which is working in conjunction with other missing people programs.

Robert Melley, Biometric's vice president and CEO, said the project wants to record the irises of 5 million children over the next few years.

"We have 1,800 sheriff's departments representing 46 states who have committed to participating," he said.

Leonard said he wants to scan the irises of all 71,000 children in the county. He plans to make the systems available at safety fairs, church meetings, school meetings and the other public events to create a local database.

He said he is working to secure private donations to cover the costs of the machines.

Kevin O'Reilly, a Biometric spokesman, said the chance for an incorrect match with iris scans is about one in 200 million.

Leonard said he will work to win over any parents that might have privacy concerns about the iris scans.

O'Reilly said the CHILD Project database removes iris scans automatically once a child turns 18, unless he or she is still listed as missing. He said that only enough information to find a child or elderly person's family is included in the database, and not other personal information such as Social Security numbers.